~~Secret~~
NOFORN/ORCON

TIER

Intelligence Report

Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis — *13 June 1997*

Colombia: Paramilitaries Gaining Strength [redacted]

Sponsored by local powerbrokers and fueled by frustration over the military's inability to control the expansion of guerrilla activity, paramilitary groups are growing and are likely to continue to expand their membership, capability, and influence over economically important territory.

- The climate of insecurity in vast areas of Colombia offers the paramilitaries a ready and lucrative market among wealthy businessmen, including drug traffickers. [redacted]

- Although they are no match militarily for the 10,000 to 15,000 full time guerrillas who operate nationwide, paramilitary groups are a force to be reckoned with, particularly in northern Colombia. [redacted]

[redacted]

CIA/APLA---IR-97-41007----

APLA 97-41007
TN: 97-03138
CL BY: [redacted]
CL REASON: 1.5 (c, d)
DECL ON: X1
DRV FROM: Multiple Sources

~~Secret~~

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: SEP 2001

Possible military links to these groups are of particular concern because of the upsurge in human rights violations attributed to paramilitary groups in recent years.

- Victims of paramilitary violence are most commonly unarmed civilians who are murdered for suspected ties to the guerrillas. [redacted]

Amid these ominous trends, President Samper and other top officials have said that the government is prepared to take firm action against the paramilitaries, ***but so far they have not matched their words with deeds.***

- Prosecutors have investigated only a fraction of the many serious incidents that have taken place in recent years, and, [redacted] some outstanding arrest warrants have not been enforced.

- ***We see scant indications that the military is making an effort to directly confront the paramilitary groups or to devote additional men or resources against them in an amount equal to the dimensions of the problem.*** [redacted]

The growth of paramilitary violence is likely to complicate US interests in Colombia in the areas of human rights and counternarcotics. [redacted]

[redacted]

Paramilitaries Growing, Expanding Activities [redacted]

Paramilitaries, a term used by many Colombians to refer to bands of armed civilians paid to protect the interests of various sponsors, are stepping up their activities in economically important areas of the country. The areas include key agricultural and cattle ranching areas, as well as mineral extraction regions in the northern and central parts of the country. (See map). [redacted]

A former Human Rights Ombudsman claims that paramilitary activity has increased by 60 percent over the past four years. Frustration over widespread insecurity caused by the military's inability to curtail the activities of the guerrilla groups--the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN)--probably are fueling the upsurge in activity by these groups. [redacted]

The use of private security forces to compensate for shortcomings in the state's ability to provide security, especially in the countryside, is not new.[1] But in recent years the seemingly unabated escalation in cases of kidnapping, extortion, theft, and murder by the guerrillas--who now number between 10,000 and 15,000 full time armed fighters, according to government estimates--has led growing numbers of local powerbrokers to sponsor paramilitaries to strike back at guerrillas and their sympathizers. Sponsors have come to view the weakness--or in some cases absence--of government authority in rural areas as an opportunity to use violence with impunity to consolidate and expand their control over territory and licit and illicit economic activity. [redacted]

The civilian sponsors of paramilitary activity include business owners, such as cattle ranchers, coffee plantation owners, and emerald miners. In some areas narcotraffickers, who, like other wealthy Colombians have been targets of guerrilla extortion and other crimes, have largely displaced legitimate landowners and are using paramilitaries to intimidate and eliminate guerrillas and others who interfere with trafficker business.[2] Paramilitaries sometimes do more for traffickers than

---

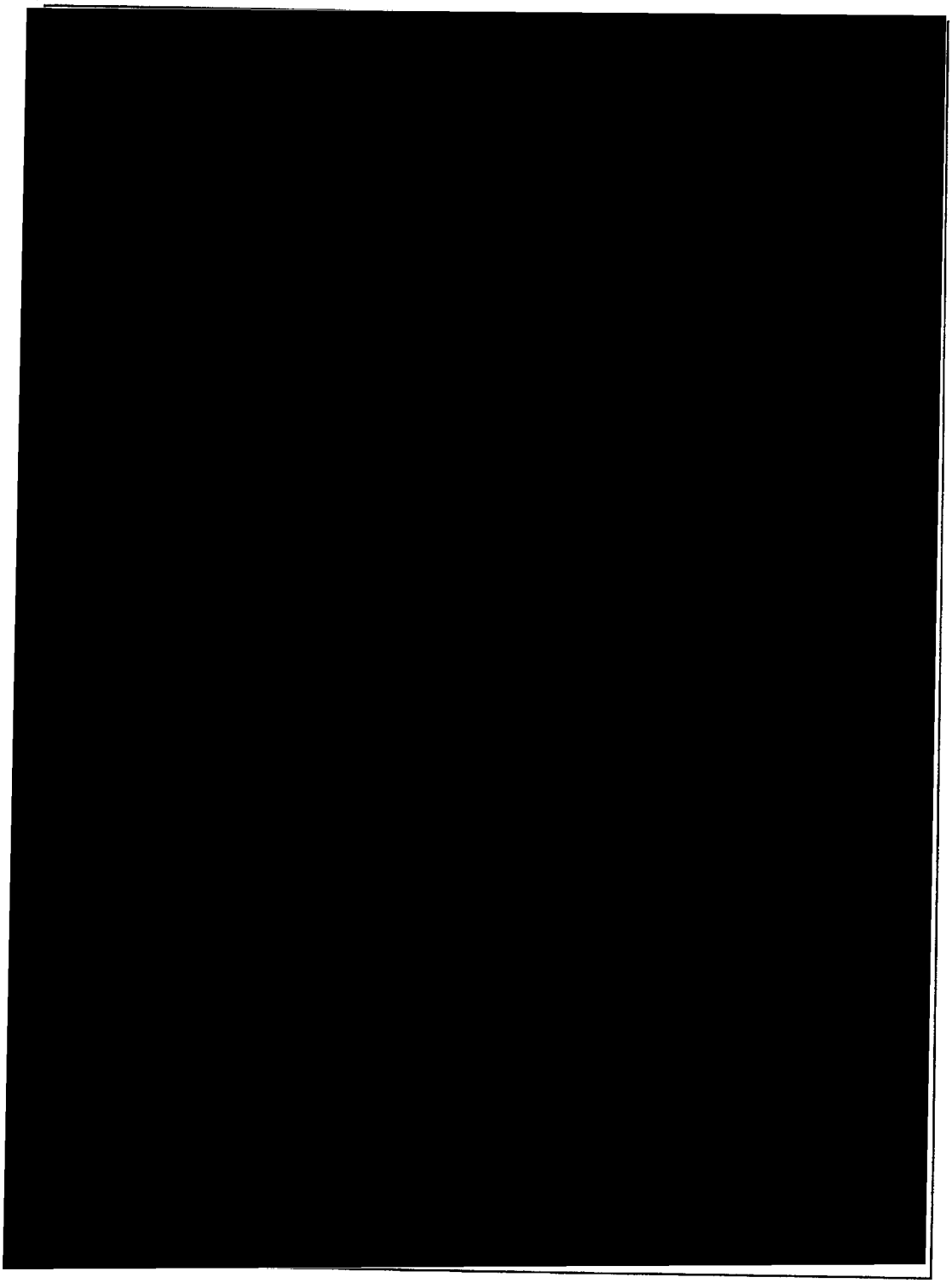
[1] Landowners, businessmen, and other wealthy patrons have long relied on private security forces to protect their lives and interests. In the 1960s, the military, facing a vast and geographically compartmented terrain with inadequate manpower and transportation, created paramilitary groups to assist them in confronting guerrilla activity in isolated parts of the country. In 1989, however, the Supreme Court struck down the statute legalizing paramilitary groups. [redacted]

[2] Despite clashing with guerrillas in some areas in northern and central Colombia, narcotraffickers enjoy well established and mutually profitable relations with guerrillas in coca and opium poppy growing areas. There, guerrillas provide security for illicit crop growing areas, clandestine laboratories, and airstrips. [redacted]

protect against guerrillas; they are used by traffickers to force owners and squatters off land.

[redacted]

[redacted] the presence of large landholdings, particularly those owned by narcotraffickers, appears to be the strongest indicator of paramilitarism. Areas with vigorous economic activity, such as cattle ranching, emerald mining, or oil production are magnets for both guerrillas and paramilitaries. As guerrillas target areas of high economic activity for extortion of "war taxes," so do business people in these areas hire paramilitaries to protect their interests against the guerrillas. [redacted]



Paramilitaries Seeking Unity [redacted]

A growing body of reporting suggests that Castano and other key paramilitary leaders have been trying to join forces under an umbrella group in an effort to portray themselves as a legitimate force in their own right, rather than bands of vigilantes and surrogates of the military, as the guerrillas charge. Following a national conference in Uraba attended by some 150 activists in mid-April, the largest paramilitary groups announced that they were forming a national, unified coordinating committee known as United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC). The leaders of these groups appear to be motivated by a desire to position themselves for a place at the table if and when peace negotiations occur between the government and the guerrillas. Improved coordination also affords the possibility of creating better networks for obtaining arms and sharing training expertise. [redacted]

It seems unlikely however, that this new structure will have a significant impact on the paramilitaries' day-to-day operations. The groups have admitted that their various regional commanders will retain independent responsibility for their respective military actions.

[redacted]

The paramilitaries may be coordinating plans to violently disrupt the coming state and local elections scheduled for 26 October. The AUC asserted in late April that it will stop leftist politicians from campaigning in areas under their control, a threat similar to that of FARC, which indicated that it would stop campaigning in its areas of influence, according to press reports. Presumably, however, the FARC will allow politicians who are sympathetic to their cause to campaign. [redacted]

Murky Ties Between the Military and Paramilitaries [redacted]

Historic links between the military--especially the Army, which is the largest service and the one that bears the brunt of the battle against the guerrillas--and paramilitary groups are well known and publicly acknowledged by the government, but the nature of the contemporary relationship is more difficult to ascertain. [redacted]

Although paramilitaries were declared illegal in 1989, some members have continued their ties to these groups, [redacted]

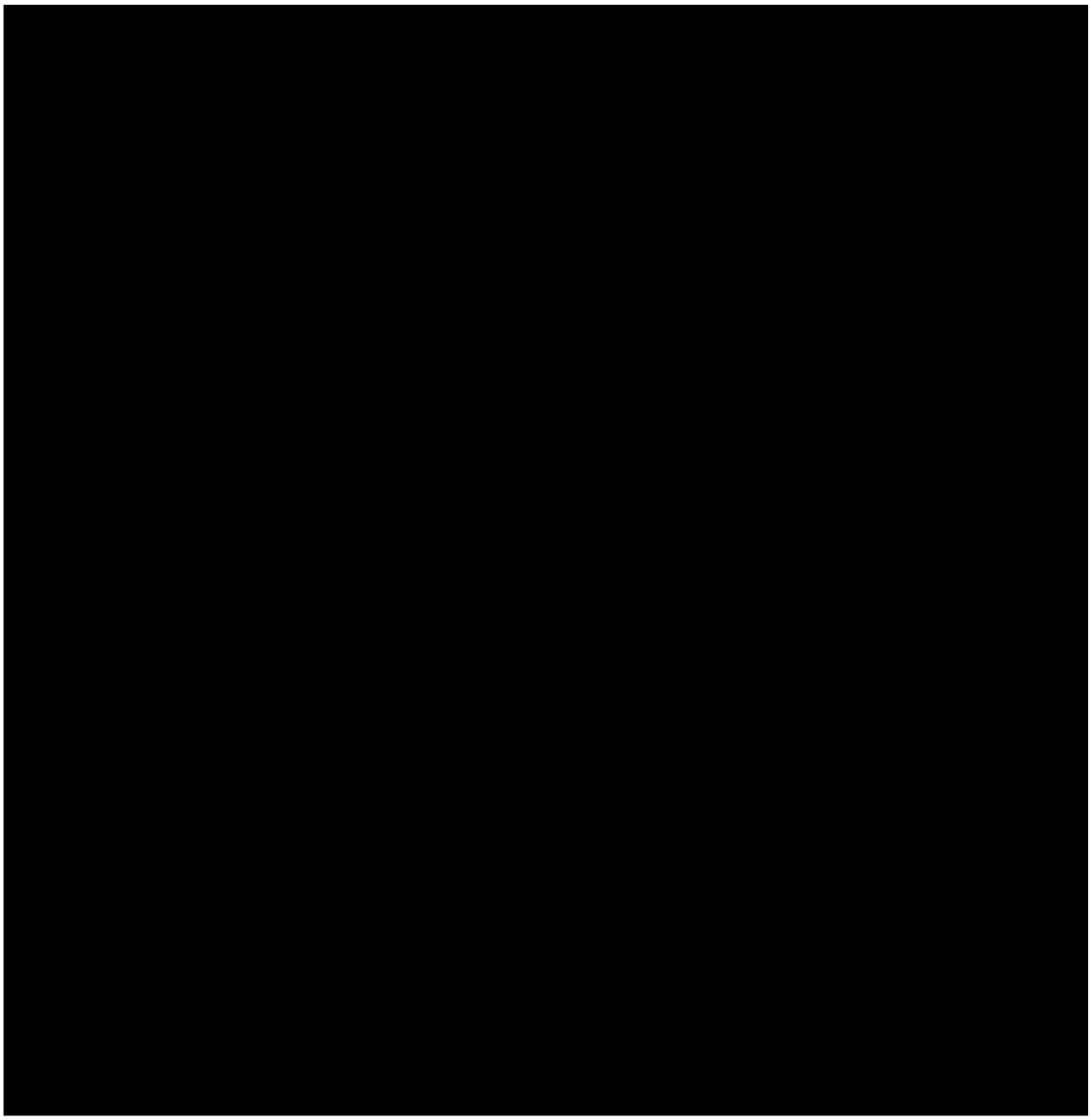
Many military officers have been embarrassed by several high profile, rebel-inflicted setbacks over the past year, and some who are demoralized by the military's inability to make headway against the guerrillas may see tolerance or support for the paramilitaries as one avenue for striking back. These officers tend to blame the military's shortcomings on the government's failure to adequately support the armed forces. Such views have been indirectly, but unmistakably articulated by Military Forces Commander Harold Bedoya, who frequently bemoans the military's manpower shortage and the judiciary's lax policies on prosecuting guerrillas.[3]

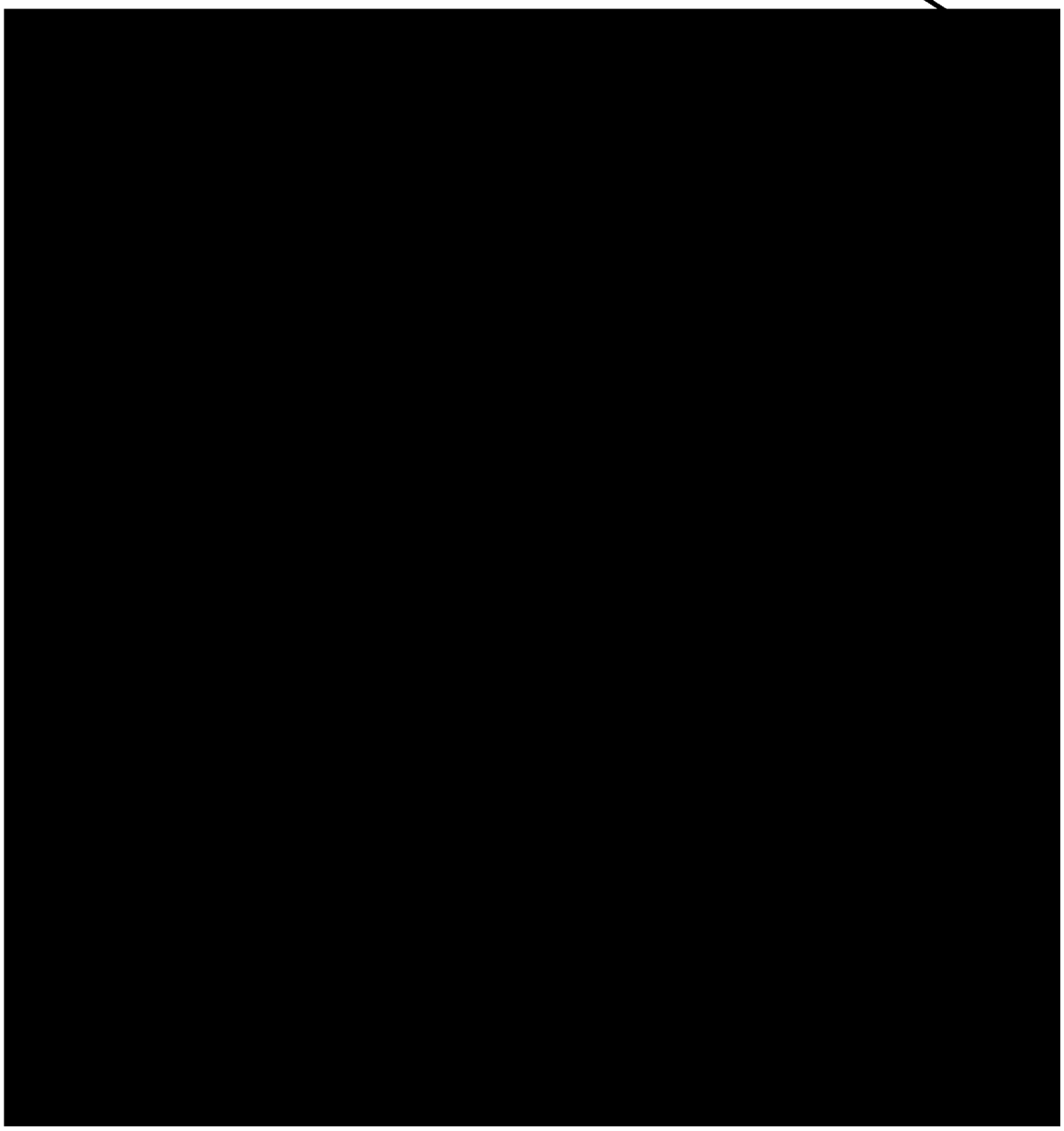
- Bedoya complained late last year that the country needs to triple its Army to least 360,000 soldiers to adequately counter the guerrilla threat. To compensate for the deficiency, in early April Bedoya proposed creating a civilian militia, but the idea has little political support.

- He has also publicly criticized judicial authorities for releasing thousands of guerrillas over the past several years whom the military had captured and turned over to the courts for prosecution.[4] [redacted]

[redacted]

[4] Prosecutors claim they have no choice but to release the insurgents because the military failed to provide admissible evidence or even positive identification of some of the guerrillas, [redacted]





[redacted]

It is difficult to corroborate the sketchy information available on the cooperation at the local level and the extent to which top military officers are aware of such ties and approve of them. In theory, government-sponsored rural security cooperatives known as "Convivirs" are the military's "eyes and ears" in remote parts of the country, but in practice some local commanders reportedly also rely on the paramilitaries for information on guerrilla activities.

[redacted]

Nevertheless, [redacted] as the larger paramilitary groups gain strength, some of the leaders appear to want to distance themselves from the popular perception that they work closely with the military--at least in their public statements --in order to foster the image of powerful, independent actors.

- Despite reporting linking him with Ramirez [redacted] Castano and other leaders like him appear to have "outgrown" the military and act with increasing independence. [redacted]

Growing Human Rights Abuses [redacted]

As paramilitaries have grown and intensified their activities, so too have the number of human rights abuses attributed to these groups. Victims of paramilitary violence are mostly unarmed, noncombatant civilians who are murdered for suspected ties to the guerrillas, according to a variety of sources. In some departments, paramilitaries carry out selective assassinations, while in other areas, particularly in northern Colombia, paramilitaries are suspected of carrying out numerous massacres of suspected leftist sympathizers.

- [redacted]

- Colombian human rights prosecutors blame paramilitaries for the majority of massacres in areas such as Uraba, Cordoba, Magdelena Medio, and the Eastern plains, [redacted]

In addition, paramilitary operations have exacerbated the already serious problem of internal displacement caused by the long-running insurgency. A recent government report indicated that paramilitary attacks are now the primary cause of the rising number of internal refugees, findings that are consistent with those in a study carried out by two human rights groups, [redacted]

- The study found that more than 180,000 Colombians were displaced by violence in 1996; it blamed paramilitary groups for 33 percent of the forced migration and guerrillas for 29 percent of the displacement, [redacted][6]

- In April this problem gained international attention when several hundred refugees crossed the border into Panama to escape clashes involving

[5] The report also noted that [redacted]

[6] According to the UN, the total number of displaced Colombians is now over 750,000. [redacted]

paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the Colombian Army. Paramilitaries allegedly pursued the refugees, some of whom they apparently believed to be guerrilla sympathizers, into Panama, where they killed five people, according to various press reports. [redacted]

Paramilitaries also add--albeit on a relatively small scale--to Colombia's kidnapping statistics. In an effort to seek revenge and pressure the guerrillas to release the hostages they hold, paramilitary leaders periodically kidnap collaborators, sympathizers, and relatives of the guerrilla leadership.

- Colombia suffers from the highest rate of kidnapping in the world; about half of the approximately 1,400 kidnappings reported in 1996 were perpetrated by guerrillas, and the other half were committed by common criminals. [redacted]

Bogota Has Done Little to Stem the Tide [redacted]

Amid growing turmoil, particularly in northern Colombia, President Samper and other top officials have uttered strong pronouncements in recent months claiming that the government was prepared to take firm action against paramilitary groups. Thus far, however, the administration has not matched its words with deeds.

- In a surprisingly candid admission, the government conceded in a recent report that it has been slow to perceive the gravity of the paramilitary problem and in mobilizing resources to confront it. [redacted]

A team of prosecutors who specialize in investigating human rights abuses has been pursuing cases against numerous paramilitary leaders and activists, but the problem has grown so large that they are only able to address a fraction of the many serious incidents that take place each day. [7]

- Last year, the team addressed approximately 100 cases involving massacres, kidnappings, forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings by paramilitaries, guerrillas, members of the security forces, and others, [redacted]

As a result of these efforts and those of the police, several important paramilitary commanders and lower level members have been arrested, but many other arrest warrants, some many years old, have not been enforced, [redacted]

[7] Local human rights advocates are likely to receive a boost when a recently established United Nations Human Rights commission local office becomes fully operational. The office will be headquartered in Bogota but its staff is expected to travel widely in Colombia [redacted]

- On 25 April police arrested Luis Alfredo Rubio Rojas, who was charged with paramilitarism and participation in a massacre in 1989, among other crimes.

- In January, Jose Anibal Rodriguez Urquijo, a member of Castano's Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Corboda and Uraba, was sentenced to 40 years in jail for the kidnapping and murder of a senator and the massacre of 43 peasants in 1989. [redacted]

Efforts to prosecute members of the military who have allegedly assisted these groups have been stymied. Prosecutors reportedly are concerned that all cases involving military assistance to paramilitaries will be turned over to military courts, which have traditionally been far more lenient on such matters. This action deprives civilian officials of an important deterrent in preventing security forces from becoming involved with paramilitaries.

- A precedent may have been set last year when a judicial council ruled that the case against Farouk Yanine--a retired three star general charged with collaborating with paramilitary groups in the Magdalena Medio region during the 1980s and "intellectual authorship" of two massacres--could only be tried in a military court.

- [redacted] was unaware of a single case in which a military court had prosecuted and sentenced a senior officer for human rights violations. [redacted]

More importantly, we see scant indication that the military leadership is making an effort to directly confront the paramilitary groups or to devote men or resources to stop their activities in an amount commensurate with the dimensions of the problem.

- Even as then Defense Minister Esguerra was announcing a new initiative against paramilitary groups last December, Bedoya said leftist guerrillas and narcotics traffickers would continue to be public-enemy number one, according to press reports. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Prospects Dim for Reining in Paramilitaries [redacted]

Barring a significant improvement in Bogota's capability to impose security in the Colombian countryside--which we believe is unlikely before the end of Samper's term in August 1998--paramilitary groups will continue to expand in membership, capability, and influence over economically important territory. Paramilitaries are, however, a long way from parity with the guerrillas in terms of unity of purpose, number of combatants, training, and equipment, and are unlikely to be able to match them for many years. But as paramilitaries become stronger, they are increasingly likely to engage in direct clashes with the guerrillas--as they do now in parts of northern Colombia---and to try to extend their operations into areas long controlled by the insurgents. [redacted]

Efforts by key paramilitary leaders to create a formal, consolidated network are likely to meet with only limited success. In view of longstanding personal rivalries, these groups are more likely to operate as a loose confederation, rather than a unified command element. Smaller paramilitary groups will continue to function as "guns for hire," engaging in ever changing alliances of convenience. [redacted]

As the frequency and intensity of violent confrontations between the paramilitaries and guerrillas grow, civilians will increasingly be caught in the crossfire. Local politicians, particularly in remote areas, will be vulnerable to intimidation by both sides, further weakening the already tenuous government control in some areas. This trend is likely to result in particularly bloody elections for state and local offices, even by Colombian standards.

- Concern about violence in the runup to elections could prompt Bogota to try to crack down on paramilitaries in coming months, and perhaps even arrest one of the high profile paramilitary leaders. As the new UN human rights office in Bogota becomes more active, it is likely to join with other domestic and international groups in pressing the government for action. [redacted]

The military is likely to react coolly to added calls by civilians for a crackdown on paramilitaries. The deficiencies in manpower, transport, and tactics that propels some

members of the security forces to work with paramilitaries is unlikely to change over the next year. The popular perception that the military is "losing the war" against the guerrillas is likely to continue to tempt some officers to pursue all avenues possible to strike back at the guerrillas. As a result, informational links and instances of active coordination between military and paramilitaries are likely to continue. [redacted]

Implications for the United States [redacted]

Thus far, paramilitary groups have refrained from attacking US citizens and facilities. Nonetheless, Americans, particularly those working in remote areas in northern Colombia, are at risk of becoming unintended victims of paramilitary attacks. The paramilitaries' victimization of growing numbers of innocent civilians runs counter to US interests in preventing human rights abuses in Colombia.

[redacted]

Convivirs: Civilian Assistance for the Embattled Army [redacted]

The Colombian Government authorized the formation of Convivirs in November 1995 to aid the military in counterinsurgency operations by empowering civilians to gather information about guerrilla activities in rural areas and pass it to local commanders.[8] Estimates of the number of Convivirs in operation vary; press [redacted] that 400-500 Convivirs have been formed as of April, [redacted] The majority operate in central and northern Colombia.

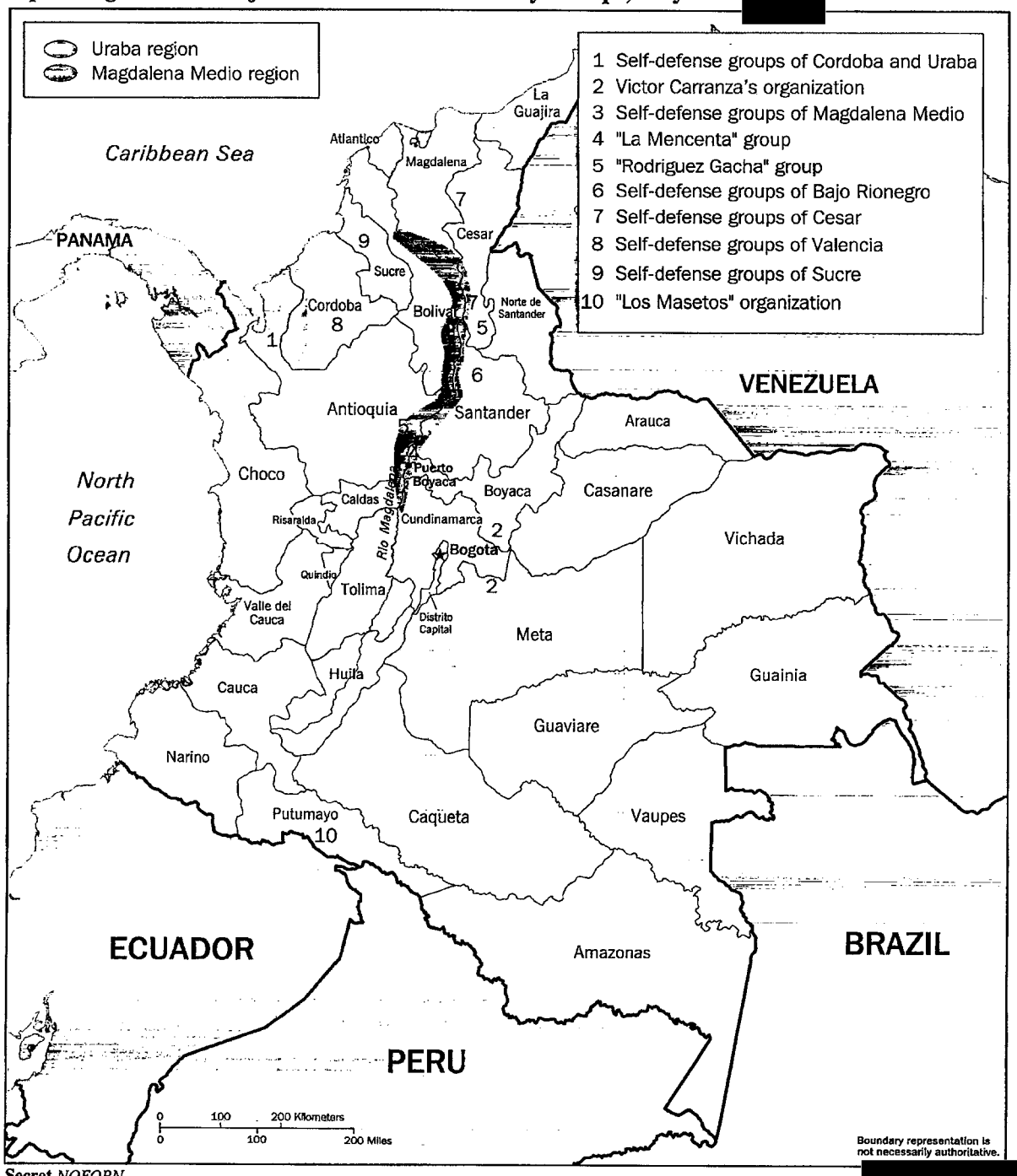
[redacted]

Instances of guerrilla violence directed against Convivir members suggests that the rebels perceive them as a threat.

- For example, four Convivir headquarters were attacked and at least two members killed in 1997, according to press reports. [redacted]

[8] The official name of these groups is Rural Cooperatives of Vigilance and Security. Convivir means 'living together' in Spanish [redacted]

Operating Areas of Major Colombian Paramilitary Groups, May 1997 [redacted]



Secret *NOFORN*

[redacted]

[redacted]

Colombia: Paramilitaries Gaining Strength [redacted]

External Distribution:

[redacted]

Colombia: Paramilitaries Gaining Strength [redacted]

[redacted]

Colombia: Paramilitaries Gaining Strength [redacted]

[redacted]

Colombia: Paramilitaries Gaining Strength [redacted]

[redacted]